Meet the researcher

Harry Pitts

Dr Frederick Harry Pitts is a Lecturer in Management at the University of Bristol, where he also leads the Faculty Research Group for Perspectives on Work. He holds a PhD in Global Political Economy from the University of Bath. He is the author of Critiquing Capitalism Today: New Ways to Read Marx *(Palgrave,2017), and, with Matt Bolton,* Corbynism: A Critical Approach *(Emerald, forthcoming).*

Q. What inspired you to go into research?

Well, where to start the story… It happened through various circumstances. I was always struck by the absurdity of a lot of things as a kid, so when I was sitting on the bus and watching everybody going to and from work as I was going to and from school, I always used to think that if you were looking down from space and saw this you would think that it's strange that the day is constructed this way. So, I guess I was always interested in the same topics that I'm interested in now: work and working times.

I was the first in my family to go to university and I didn't know anyone who had been to university when I was younger, so I didn't really have a sense of what being an academic was. The nearest thing I had to hand was Sam Neill's character in *Jurassic Park*. After that I wanted to be an archaeologist. I was also a big fan of another archaeologist- my maternal grandfather, Ralph, was a stunt driver in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and so I guess Indiana Jones was another academic who loomed large for me. Later on, I got into reading and I read some Marx quite early- the *Communist Manifesto*, when I was 14 or something, and I was into the more cerebral, intellectual side of punk music, so I guess the dye was cast a bit by then.

During my A-levels I didn't pay much attention to my studies. I went to university in the village I grew up in, at what was then Falmouth College of Arts. My UCAS got rejected from every other university I applied to, so I stayed where I was and did a media studies degree. After my first year, I dropped out of university to try and become a rock and roll star, but the band thing didn't quite work out how we imagined it would - we weren't Oasis or the Rolling Stones overnight. So, I went back to university again, and I didn't really want to be there. But my second semester back, I read a book, *Witness Against the Beast* by E.P. Thompson, a Marxist analysis of the works of William Blake and their relationship with religious nonconformism - and that just changed everything.

After that, my attitude completely changed, I spent all my spare time reading, completely voracious, and I didn't miss a single seminar or lecture ever again. One thing I found was that there is always one Marxist in a department who will take you under their wing and who will guide you. My undergraduate dissertation supervisor, Meredith Miller, really motivated me to go further and read and understand Marx. So, when my degree finished I applied to do the only Masters course I could do on the local campus, in political theory. I did that part-time while working in call centre employment, admin work, working a bit in adult education. I had no expectations of anything beyond that.

The first module centred on a close reading of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, and that again totally changed my life. I received from it a completely different way of understanding my own position as someone who was working in call centres and admin jobs, a very different line of work from the skilled working-class background of my family. Hardt and Negri gave me the tools to understand that, and I've been researching the same topics drawn from that book - immaterial labour, the changing of world of work, the future of capitalism, revisionist readings of Marx- ever since. It is to this day the best module I've ever taken. At the end of my Masters, my then disser-

tation supervisor, Tim Cooper, suggested 'Why don't you do a PhD?' I really hadn't thought of it. In the end I applied to quite a few places and, successful in getting funding at only one, ended up moving away from Cornwall to study at Bath. So that's how I got into research, and now, well, I'm here…

Q. Who inspires you, in the research field and beyond?

My paternal grandfather, Fred. He read a lot- encyclopaedias and Reader's Digest books of facts, things like that, but he wasn't educated in any substantial way. That passion for reading and the search for knowledge he had, I have always found quite inspiring. I think of him a lot as he died the week I started at Bath, so his passing is bound up with the start of my research career. As regards the political commitment of my research, my maternal grandmother, Sheila, worked in big houses and out on the land, and the story she tells of her own act of resistance against the condescension of rural class relations has always influenced the way I see the world.

Q. What are the best, and worst, aspects of working in the research field?

The best thing is that it's the activity which I feel realises and self-actualises what I want to do as person. I also happen to be paid for that.

On the flip side, there is the tendency to self-exploit and work every minute of the day, on the assumption that you would be doing it anyway - but when things are determined as 'wage-labour' that activity does change to a certain extent, so you aren't only doing it for yourself, but also someone else. Then, there are the forms of measurement and the incentivisation of certain kinds of research that can sometimes make you feel conflicted about trying to do what you want with your time.

But still, I could not think of a job I would rather do than this because it allows me to do what I would be doing anyway but on the happenstance that I am paid for it, which is great. However, with the context of higher education, and the valuation of research outputs as this fetishized object resulting from thought and thinking, I find that can pose difficulties for some of the types of research that I do which are more critical or theoretical, which it can be harder to find outlets for that are valued in the same way as more empirical outputs.

Q. Some of the themes in our conference issue include communication and mental health. How important do you think good relationships with the people you work with are to maintaining good mental health and wellbeing, given the many challenges that modern academics face?

Well, we have just gone through this period of industrial action and I think that this has acted as a release valve on a lot of pressure which has built up for academics who otherwise would have burnt out. Although those weeks of strike action meant that academics had to catch up on their workload in fewer and fewer days of work each week, it also set boundaries on what could be done - and academics were also encouraged to only work their contracted hours. I noticed that this not only brought the people around me closer together and we felt more support from one another, through the experience of taking action together and being on picket lines, but that it also set new expectations and standards about what people would and wouldn't do.

This seems to have been quite transformative, although I don't know how long it will last. In terms of stress, those pressures are still there, but there is the possibility now that people have realised their strength to withstand them in ways that might combat this. The strike was an intervention in the ticking time bomb of mental health in academia, and people have realised their own individual strength to say no.

Q. Your research looks at the future of work, encompassing topics such as basic income, automation, precarity, and so on. What do *you* imagine the daily life of humans will look like in the future?

A great deal of current thinking on this is presupposed on the idea that robots are going to replace humans, but I don't think that's going to happen. I think, if anything, the tendencies towards new tech-

nologies in the workplace will augment human labour to make it potentially an even more alienating, abstract form of drudgery. Combined with creeping fascism, and nationalism, and populism, maybe things don't look so pretty.

Everyone is treating this as if there are utopian tendencies in all this technological change, and with policy suggestions like the basic income which require quite a strong and assertive state – but, if that coincides with those political conditions, I don't think that what we're facing is utopia but rather something much more dystopian. So, how I see things in the future: I'm not hopeful for the possibility of change but I do think the possibility of new forms of governing our relationship with work, new ways of structuring that through things like cooperatives, offer some potential for change. But, I think that some of what we recognise as problems with capitalism maybe are more intractable and permanent than just a critique of capitalism would allow. So although the work I do is critical of capitalism, I recognise that the future that we are able to foresee developing now could involve something worse than that rather than something better.

Q. Interviewer: So, it's not so much the technology itself as the social systems that surround that, is that what you're saying?

The technology doesn't come out of a vacuum – very few people would say that technology is just an autonomous force itself. However, whilst people are talking about technology accomplishing these changes in the workplace, they are also forgetting about their own power to sculpt how that pans out. Unless you face up to the social and political conditions out of which this stuff is coming, that kind of economic determinism that things are just going to change of their own accord is dangerously complacent. Everyone is fixated on the future and we spend too much time talking about the future right now. I prefer to talk about *futures*, in a sense that there are multiple, plural futures available to us which we can choose between and interact with and shape.

All this time spent thinking about the future, people aren't really facing the contradictions and their consequences that look more like the past than the present. Everyone loves to think that they are living in a golden age where the future's just knocking on their doorstep and we're in a great wave of innovations. But I think analytically that doesn't capture the continuities. It emphasises change too much. So, I don't actually think things are going to be drastically different – at least not for the better but potentially for the worst. Right now, part of the imperative to some extent is to defend the way things are. The changes that are underway may make us wish that we'd done more to protect the liberal democratic capitalism than we had, and I say that as a Marxist: there's something worse.

Q. How relevant do you think Marxist theory is in a post-Brexit Britain?

Well, we aren't in a post-Brexit Britain yet…The problem with Marxist theory is Marxists. A lot of Marxists are fundamentally wrong about how they see the world. I'm uncomfortable about calling myself a Marxist- I know I just did- but Marx himself said to his son-in-law Paul Lafargue 'one thing's for sure, I'm not a Marxist'. Marx is a big open book, a lot of his work was unpublished in his lifetime, it was cobbled together from bits and pieces he'd left lying around. So, what we know as Marxism is open to revision and interpretation and deconstruction and reconstruction, and there are better and worse applications of that.

So how *I* think about Marx, many Marxists would reject as fundamentally un-Marxist. The less dogmatic it can be, and the less fixated on struggles of the past, specifically escaping the inheritances of Bolshevism and Leninism and Trotskyism as far as possible - throw away that baggage and it can make itself relevant. A lot of the UK left still see things through the prism of what Lenin wrote in the early 20th century & it even finds itself defending Brexit, as a type of left-wing Brexit or 'Lexit'- as if Brexit is going to some how offer the possibility for a state-managed economy and nationalisation of the railways and that type of thing. That's playing out in elements of the Corbyn project- something I chart, with Matt Bolton, in a forthcoming book, *Corbynism: A Critical Approach*.

I hope we don't yet live in a post-Brexit Britain. I hope that Brexit doesn't happen. I don't think Marx would recognise this legacy he's left behind of people advocating a completely reactionary and nationalist policy of retrenchment into the nation state. So, to

stand the question on its head, Marxist theory can make itself completely irrelevant in a post-Brexit Britain, through facilitating the existence of post-Brexit Britain by thinking there is some good in it… which there isn't.

Q. We heard that you were involved in setting up the TOR journal at the beginning, as one of the founding editors. What motivated you to set that up, and also do you have any general tips for students about how to be successful in getting published?

The TOR Journal was set up at the instigation of a fine academic named Ben Bowman, another PhD student at the time on the politics pathway. We both started at the same time, as part of the first South West Doctoral Training Centre cohort. The pressures on PhD students to publish have increased now but back then it was a place for people to get used to the publishing and peer-review process in a welcoming way. My responsibility was setting up different sections, where people could submit articles which weren't normal journal articles but shorter, comment -type pieces which applied their research expertise.

I published a lot during my PhD, because I'd already done a lot of writing on my topic during my MA and MRes, which meant I could put a lot of my research out there as journal articles while I was doing my PhD. Whenever I finished writing something for my PhD, I tended to package it up and submit it somewhere, but not necessarily to well-known journals - it was more of a quantity rather than quality approach in that sense, I chose places that were open access and that got my work out there.

I enjoy writing, and write a lot, and was consistent in what I was writing about from an early stage, so when I got to my PhD I had research that I could get out there. But - and this might be different for different people - I don't think publishing a lot in the long run did me a lot of favours when I was trying to get a job after my PhD. It was later on when I published in some slightly better journals that verified this, as I don't think many people looked back at what I'd published before. So, if I was going to offer some advice it might be to focus on getting one or two really good high-quality papers out of your PhD, or do something that shows the potential to publish in high quality journals- work your way up but be selective about what you are aiming for.

As I was finishing my PhD, I got a book contract for the theoretical part of my research- now published as *Critiquing Capitalism Today: New Ways to Read Marx*, and I had this in mind whilst I was completing the final leg of my PhD. I found an appropriate book series and submitted a proposal to that- following advice given to me by one of my supervisors. This was really good as at the end of a PhD you have such a big piece of work. Some people's PhD's will lend themselves better to being partitioned into papers than others, and some people will have a more theoretical contribution, which is maybe more difficult to partition. The book route offers another alternative route for the output of work and people shouldn't neglect that as an idea, even though books are probably undervalued in comparison to a paper - a PhD is a book in itself after all.